



Lewis and Clark in Kansas, a mural by David H. Overmyer, in the Kansas State Capitol.

Beyond Lewis & *The Army Explores the West*

TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO THE COUNTRY SEEMED TO END AT THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER; THE WEST WAS A VAST, UNEXPLORED AREA, UNKNOWN TO THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES. IN 1804, WHEN LEWIS AND CLARK AND THEIR CORPS OF DISCOVERY EXPLORERS SET OUT FROM MISSOURI INTO THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE, THEY OPENED THE WEST TO MILITARY EXPLORATION AND TO THE MINDS OF NEARLY EVERYONE. THEIRS WOULD BE THE FIRST OF MANY WESTERN EXPEDITIONS HEADED BY THE U.S. ARMY DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. OBSERVING, RECORDING, GATHERING SCIENTIFIC DATA, CREATING OVERLAND ROUTES, DETERMINING BOUNDARIES, AND INTERACTING WITH NATIVE AMERICANS WERE THE MAIN PURPOSES OF THESE EXPLORATIONS, WHICH TRAVERSED KANSAS AND POINTS WEST BETWEEN 1804 AND 1879.

BEYOND LEWIS AND CLARK: THE ARMY EXPLORES THE WEST, A SPECIAL EXHIBIT EXAMINING THE EXPLORERS AND THEIR TREKS INTO THE WEST, OPENS AT THE KANSAS MUSEUM OF HISTORY ON DECEMBER 10, 2004, AND RUNS THROUGH AUGUST 14, 2005. THIS NATIONALLY TOURING COMMEMORATIVE EXHIBITION, HONORING THE BICENTENNIAL OF THE LEWIS AND CLARK EXPEDITION, IS A COLLABORATION OF THE KANSAS, VIRGINIA, AND WASHINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETIES, AND THE

FRONTIER ARMY MUSEUM AT FORT LEAVENWORTH.

BEYOND LEWIS AND CLARK FOLLOWS THE TRAILS OF SUCH MILITARY LEADERS AS ZEBULON MONTGOMERY PIKE, STEPHEN H. LONG, JOHN CHARLES FRÉMONT, AND GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER, HIGHLIGHTING THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS WHILE NOT IGNORING THEIR FAILURES AND SOMETIMES FOOLHARDY BLUNDERS.

AMONG THE ARTIFACTS ON DISPLAY ARE THE AIR RIFLE BELONGING TO MERIWETHER LEWIS, WILLIAM CLARK'S ORIGINAL FIELD NOTES AND MAPS, WATERCOLORS FROM THE 1819 LONG EXPEDITION, AND A MOUNTAIN HOWITZER OF THE TYPE TAKEN ON FRÉMONT'S 1843–1844 EXPEDITION.

ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES, WE TRACK THE EARLY EXPEDITIONS THAT JOURNEYED ACROSS THE WESTERN HALF OF OUR COUNTRY, OPENING THE WEST AND LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A YOUNG NATION. THE TEXT OF THIS ARTICLE IS FROM INFORMATION COMPILED AND WRITTEN BY THE PROJECT TEAM OF THE *BEYOND LEWIS AND CLARK* EXHIBIT. MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE MILITARY EXPEDITIONS IS AVAILABLE IN THE PUBLICATION *BEYOND LEWIS AND CLARK: THE ARMY EXPLORES THE WEST* BY JAMES RONDA, CONSULTING HISTORIAN FOR THE EXHIBIT.

America was born with an exploring spirit. And throughout the nineteenth century it was the American West that captured this spirit and held a deep fascination for those in the eastern United States and in Europe alike—so much so that the West took on almost mythical proportions of a land larger than life. Indeed it was a vast country of plains, mountains, deserts, rivers, and, some believed, of lost cities and hidden empires. The West, it seemed, was a mystery—a mystery that only an explorer could unravel.

Thomas Jefferson, although never journeying farther west than his home state of Virginia, selected Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark as his “eyes” to behold the wonders of the West. Thus, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, which set out



in 1804 from Camp Wood, across the Mississippi River from St. Charles, Missouri, became the first U.S. military exploration to chart the American West.

That the army should lead the way for federal exploration came in part from a long-standing European tradition of using the military for such purposes. Like his European counterparts, Jefferson realized that successful expeditions relied on structure and discipline, key principles of the army. Military leadership was necessary for a number of other reasons: an exploration of this magnitude would need money that only the government could provide; the army took orders, which assured Jefferson that his vision would be followed; and the army was the only organization at that time trained in the sciences, a primary necessity for the voyage west.

During the nineteenth century a corps of government “scientists” (the word was not coined until 1830) pushed westward to

explore—that is, to observe, record, describe, survey, map, collect, and, some would say, to capture more than a million square miles of the United States west of the Mississippi. Army explorers were not amateurs, nor were they mountain men or entrepreneurs. They were government officers, scientifically trained, whose findings in the West have been likened to “building an empire of the mind.”

This year, 2004, we commemorate the bicentennial of Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery setting out for a twenty-eight-month journey across the northern reaches of the



William Clark (far left) and Meriwether Lewis (left) are depicted with members of their expedition on the Lower Columbia River.

Louisiana Purchase to the Pacific Ocean. In June 1804 the entourage arrived in what would become Kansas. Near present Atchison the men celebrated the first Fourth of July west of the Mississippi, and after fourteen days left our state to move on north and west. The Corps of Discovery would pass through our region again, in 1806, on its return from the west coast. Although Thomas Jefferson had hoped his explorers would find a northwest water route to the Pacific, they found instead that one did not exist. But in their eight-thousand-mile journey, Lewis and Clark gathered a wealth of knowledge. Jefferson wrote of their voyage, they “delineate with correctness the great arteries of this great country.” The Corps of Discovery traveled through the territory of fifty different Indian tribes and documented 178 new plant specimens and 122 different animals.

Courtesy Amon Carter Museum

Even before Lewis and Clark returned from their travels, a second expedition was already under way. In August 1805 Lieutenant Zebulon Pike left St. Louis with twenty men to find the source of the Mississippi River, and a year later he received orders to locate the headwaters of the Arkansas and Red Rivers to the southwest.

He failed on both his 1805 and 1806 missions, although he did offer the first cartographic portrayal of the Mississippi's upper regions. Labeled in recent years as "the poor man's Lewis and Clark," Pike was an energetic soldier, but an unlucky and star-crossed explorer. Falling under the influence of General James Wilkinson, governor of Louisiana Territory, Pike was party (perhaps unwittingly) to the governor's opportunistic plans to carve out an empire on the southwestern frontier. His 1806 expedition took him across the midsection of Kansas, north to Nebraska, and back into Kansas before journeying west and south into Mexico, where he was arrested for trespassing into Spanish territory. Eager for glory, Pike, however, is immortalized only by Pike's Peak, a Colorado mountain that he neither named nor climbed. To his discredit, Pike succeeded in planting the idea in the minds of Americans that the Plains were as uninhabitable as the "sandy deserts of Africa."

The zeal for government exploration dwindled when President Jefferson left office in 1809. But following the War of 1812, Major Stephen H. Long rekindled the exploring spirit

and led five military expeditions through the West between 1816 and 1823. Perhaps the best known of Long's explorations, the ill-fated Yellowstone Expedition came in 1819. That year Secretary of War John C. Calhoun wrote to Long, "You will assume



Courtesy National Park Service



Courtesy Edward Thorp Gallery

Zebulon Pike (above) succeeded in planting the idea in the minds of Americans that the Plains were as uninhabitable as the "sandy deserts of Africa." Stephen H. Long (below) was the first to utilize steamboats on the Missouri River in his 1819 expedition.

the command of the Expedition to explore the country between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains. . . .you will permit nothing worthy of notice, to escape your attention."

The grand scale of this venture required a grand scheme of transportation: steamboats, six of them, were launched on the Missouri River, the first ever to ply this waterway. The Western Engineer transported Long and his group of professional scientists, including a botanist, zoologist, geologist, and naturalist.

In western Missouri a company of thirteen, led by zoologist Thomas Say, left Long's party for an overland journey that took



Courtesy Independence National Historical Park



Courtesy Clinton M. Cary

them into Kansas as far as present Manhattan. From there they turned back northeast and rejoined the main party on the Missouri River in present Doniphan County. Because of the Missouri's shallow waters, the expedition went no farther than Council Bluffs, Iowa, where many members spent the winter.

The following spring the explorers again headed west, this time overland to the Platte River, which they followed to the

as such was most responsible for the rapid exploration of the West that ignited during this time. Bursting onto this scene was a young army engineer who would later be considered by many the preeminent explorer of the American West. At age twenty, dashing and charming John Charles Frémont was appointed to the elite Corps of Topographical Engineers, and in 1837-1838 he gained a solid scientific background when he accompanied French

scientist Joseph N. Nicollet on a survey of



Courtesy National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center

In 1842 John Charles Frémont (left) mapped a major crossing point on the Continental Divide that thousands of immigrants would utilize as they traveled the Oregon Trail.

Rocky Mountains. From there, Long and his party proceeded southward to the Arkansas River and on to the Canadian River in present Okla-

homa. Crossing the hot Southern Plains during the summer of 1820, Long proclaimed the region "almost wholly unfit for cultivation." His disparaging words, as had Pike's, fostered the theory that most of the vast region was, as he labeled it on his 1823 map, a "Great American Desert."

Long's last expedition in 1823 closed out two decades of military exploration, leaving much of the West still unmapped and unknown to the U.S. government. While Pike's and Long's descriptions diminished government enthusiasm for westward exploration, the area was an open haven for civilian trappers and mountain men. Adventurers such as Manuel Lisa, Jim Bridger, and Jedediah Smith penetrated every corner of the Far West. Close behind the mountain men was yet another group of independent explorers that included artists, scientists, and a growing number of health seekers and tourists. Individuals such as naturalist John James Audubon and artist George Catlin surfaced throughout the 1830s and 1840s as notable civilian explorers of the American West.

In the late 1830s the U.S. Army again became prominent in western exploration with the formation of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, headed by Colonel John James Abert. The new organization became an independent branch of the army and

on to lead five expeditions across the Plains between 1842 and 1853, which garnered him the nickname "Pathfinder," a misnomer since he traveled few trails unknown to his guides. Nevertheless, Frémont's vivid maps, reports, and descriptions of his journeys (written with the assistance of his wife, Jessie Benton Frémont, a gifted author) had abounding influence on the settlement of the West. Encouraged by father-in-law Senator Thomas Hart Benton, the voice of Manifest Destiny, and supported by John Abert, chief of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, Frémont pursued his fascination of the West with ardent passion. While his mapping and scientific study contributed strongly to western discovery, Frémont also was known to be reckless, foolhardy, and caught up in national glory. Some historians believe the Pathfinder should be judged on the accomplishments of his earliest expeditions in which he mapped a major crossing point on the Continental Divide (1842) and circumnavigated the West (1843-1844), identifying the vast interior drainage system and labeling it the "Great Basin."

The mid-1840s through the mid-1850s might well be called the apex of army exploration, during which time the topographical engineers engaged in massive surveys of the West. The onset of the Mexican War in 1846 brought U.S. military troops into the Southwest, which opened the door for scientific exploration in that area under the leadership of Lieutenant William H. Emory. Following the war's end in 1848, Emory was selected to head a six-year survey project of the



Courtesy Little Bighorn Battlefield NM

Southwest, the largest exploration to date mounted by the topographical engineers.

The 1840s witnessed dramatic expansion of the United States. Oregon, California, Texas, and the terri-

entists now were civilian, not military. Many interested colleges and private organizations competed for the West's scientific rewards and financial opportunities. "The time has come to change the system of examination," Wheeler wrote in 1873, "from that idea of exploration . . . to a thorough survey that shall build up from time to time, and fortify our knowledge of the structural relation of the whole." Perhaps he had, even as early as 1871,

forecasted the future of exploration when he wrote, "The day of the path-finder has sensibly ended."

Before Wheeler's expeditions concluded in 1879, however, the U.S. Army had one more mapping excursion in its plans, this one coming in 1874. Commanding a thousand soldiers, General George Armstrong Custer rode into the Black Hills of the Dakotas that year to conduct a resource survey. Gold was rumored in the area, but this land was known to be sacred to the Sioux. Military concerns were growing over the de-

fense of the Northern Plains frontier, and one of the missions charged Custer with determining the size and strength of the Sioux Nation. In 1876, the year of our nation's one-hundredth birthday, Custer and troops of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry met their end at the hands of the Sioux at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in Montana.

Three-quarters of a century of military explorations reached its end in 1879 with the creation of the United States Geological Survey. Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery had opened the West in 1804, whetting the appetites of the masses eager for adventure, eager for land, and eager for knowledge. From this knowledge we have learned, we have gained, we have prospered. But in transforming the West from a far-distant landscape to a network of population, business, and industry, we have exploited, depleted, and sometimes destroyed. Exploration of the West was marked by invasion as much as it was by revelation; it was as much about dispossession as it was about possession. As historian James Ronda has written, "Army explorers were part of the revelation of the West—a process with its own complex measures of triumph and tragedy. By 'opening' the West for some, those explorers and their journeys 'closed' the West for others."

KH

General George Armstrong Custer (above) headed one of the army's final western explorations in 1874, conducting a resource survey in the Dakotas.

tory of New Mexico were all newly acquired, and the United States required a fast and direct route through the West to link to this vast region. A transcontinental railroad was the obvious solution. In 1853 Congress authorized the Pacific Railroad Survey, which, during the next two years, mapped five major routes through the West. Captain John W. Gunnison was in charge of surveying the 38th parallel, which began at Fort Leavenworth and moved in a southwesterly direction across Kansas, then followed the upper Arkansas River and proceeded to Colorado, eventually reaching California. It is interesting that none of the five routes was initially built, but the army's explorations did result in an illustrated thirteen-volume encyclopedia of western experience.

The Civil War interrupted the business of westward expansion, but in the late 1860s the nation again turned its attention to exploration. The year 1867 witnessed the surveying expeditions of Clarence King into the Colorado/Wyoming region and points west, and 1871 began the surveys of George M. Wheeler into the Southwest.

But changes were coming quickly for soldier-explorers. The U.S. Army no longer was the primary institution training scientists and providing funding for western surveys; the best field sci-